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SCHORR REPORT: CBS, TURNER

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WASHINGTON—Daniel Schorr worked 23 years for CBS News and another five at Ted Turner's Cable News Network. Having left CNN after a contract dispute, he's now doing commentary for National Public Radio, working on two public-TV projects, lecturing—and answering questions about Ted Turner and CBS.

The queries, of course, concern Turner's proposed hostile takeover of the network. Many Wall Streeters doubt that Turner will succeed. But thoughts of his audacious effort still will be on the minds of the executives attending CBS' annual affiliates convention, which gets down to business Tuesday in San Francisco.

A month earlier here, Schorr, 68, was asked what CBS—particularly CBS News—might be like should his old boss actually succeed in his campaign, begun last March, to own the billion-dollar empire founded in 1928 by William Paley.

Well, the New York-born newsman replied, although Turner is

thought of as being in the conservative camp of Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), he never has heard the flamboyant delegate from Atlanta talk of the "liberal bias" that Helms and Co. allege exists at CBS News.

Turner is not an easy party to characterize, he added.

"Here is a guy who'll go and make a speech to the National Conservative Foundation saying television is in the hands of people who are not patriotic enough. And they'll cheer, say 'OK, here's one of our guys, patriotic, conservative,' and so on.

"But the same guy will go off duck hunting with Fidel Castro, and come back and say, 'Castro is not a Communist; he's just a dictator—like me.'"

Turner also will do such things, Schorr said, as try to negotiate an exchange of TV programs with the Soviet Union, and air over his WTBS superstation the TV movie "Threads," the British-made, horrors-of-nuclear-war counterpart of ABC's "The Day After."

"So he is nobody's captive ideologue. He is Ted Turner, who on many domestic matters, especially economic matters, tends to be very

conservative. But then, because he is a free spirit, he'll go off and take a position that enrages conservatives."

Schorr is uncertain what, if any, effect Turner would have on CBS News if he acquired the company, although "he's always talked about wanting to see more success stories. He thinks there's too much failure shown, too much cynicism on television."

"The one single thing he's always talked about in all the time I've known him is that he does not see why we should not have a piece once a week about the Boy Scouts. He believes in the Boy Scouts. He believes they do wonderful things."

"But he's not tried to impose this on CNN, I must say."

"From what I know of him," Schorr said at the start of his musings on a Turner-run CBS, "I think he would get into the entertainment division long before he'd get into news. With CNN, I've had the impression he's not kept a very close watch other than to pick the anchors."

"He's not a journalist, he hardly pretends to understand news, and his interest in news tends to be rather peripheral to other interests."

Such might sound surprising, if only because the man did start the nation's first all-news cable-TV operation in 1980. But in Schorr's view, Turner didn't act because of any dedication to journalism; he acted because he felt that 24-hour news was a potentially lucrative programming form that the major networks weren't offering.

"In other words . . . it was an entrepreneurial decision as a programmer, that it (news) was going to be a salable product of the future."

This decision, in Schorr's opinion, "does not really differ very much from the way Bill Paley got into news years before, when somebody came to him and said, 'Hitler's running all over Europe, we now have the capacity for shortwave broadcasts, and it would make interesting programming to have Ed Murrow come on and give a description of what it was like when Hitler went into Austria.'"

"Paley came to news, not because he was a journalist, not because he had some mystique about what news is, but because someone explained to him that it was time for it. And that is the way—with all respect for each of them—that Turner got into news."

"It was a business decision that it would sell."

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Schorr willingly became part of the sales effort—and raised some eyebrows—when he became the first prominent broadcast newsman to sign on with Turner's fledgling network. Dan Schorr, the tough, no-nonsense, often abrasive Capitol Hill veteran, teaming with this tradition-breaking yachtsman, this network-denouncing, joke-cracking good ol' boy?

Schorr allowed that at first glance it was an unlikely combination.

But he described it as "a marriage of convenience" for both sides. He was well aware that Turner "wanted me for public-relations purposes because people tended not to take him seriously on the subject (of news). . . ."

But he didn't mind, he said. Having resigned from CBS in 1976, he wanted to get back on the air, back to daily reporting. And Turner, he said, "convinced me that my interest in journalism fitted with his business interests in creating a new journalistic vehicle"—and even guaranteed his journalistic

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